

## **Philistines vs. Aesthetes: the Press campaign against Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement**

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Walter Hamilton observed, in his *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (1882), that nobody had heard of the aesthetes until they were made the target of 'our sneering satirists'. Ironically the satirical response to the Aesthetic Movement is remembered more vividly than the subject satirised. Yet despite its recognised importance there has been no overview of the range and variety of satire directed against the Aesthetes and Oscar Wilde by the contemporary press. Even the comprehensive *Oscar Wilde in Context* (2013) omits Wilde's relationship with *Punch* and other serio-comic journals. The Press played a vital role in forming Wilde's aesthetic persona and establishing his celebrity. It was a symbiotic relationship, with both parties capitalising on notoriety. My book length project, which also includes novels and stage productions as well as the press, intends to remedy this situation.

### ***Punch*- cartoons, parodic poems, and editorial comment**

Mr Punch's campaign against the Aesthetes was prolonged, from the late 1860s to 1895, when Wilde was found guilty of gross indecency. George du Maurier was responsible for several cartoon series: *Chinamania*; the *Jack Spratts*; the *Mutual Admiration Society*; *Nincompoopiana*, which overtly set its sights on Oscar Wilde and *Edwin and Angelina*. Two stereotypes emerge from du Maurier's pen, the male aesthete, a poet, painter, or critic, who is a sham, or worse a charlatan, and the silly women who are taken in by him. (Anne Anderson, 'The 'Mutual Admiration Society' or Mr Punch against the Aesthetes', *Popular Narrative Media*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, Spring 2009, pp.69-88).

While du Maurier's cartoons have garnered much attention, *Mr Punch*'s vitriolic prose has often escaped scrutiny. Indeed, the full and half-cut cartoons have often been separated from the accompanying text, thereby losing much of their meaning and impact.

### **Francis Burnand**

To understand why critics of the movement felt so threatened by Aesthetic values, requires a deeper understanding of the writers and cartoonists who worked for *Punch*. As editor of *Punch* from 1880, Francis Burnand was openly hostile towards Wilde whom he vilified as a 'sham-aesthete'. It has been suggested that Burnand, held a personal grudge due to one of his sons going 'too far' and being convicted of 'unnatural offences'. (Anne Anderson, 'Secret lives, non-de-plumes, and mistaken identities: the shadowy Arthur Bransby Burnand aka Anton Strelezki', *The Wildean A Journal of Oscar Wilde Studies*, forthcoming)

### **Harry Furniss**

Charles Keene, Edward Linley Sambourne and Harry Furniss, better known for his 'Humours of Parliament', added a few cartoons to the *Punch* corpus. Fellow Anglo-Irishman Furniss appears to have resented Wilde's rise to fame. He illustrated the review of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (*Illustrated London News*) and *The Colonel* (*Punch* and *Illustrated London News*).



Although his political cartoons have garnered attention, Furniss lacks a comprehensive biography. Many publications still carry the misinformation that he was dismissed from *Punch* for selling one of his cartoons to Pears, the soap manufacturers. In fact, it was Furniss who resigned over the matter, as he lost the copyright. Although he launched the magazine *Lika Joko*, as a rival to *Punch*, the enterprise soon floundered. It contains several rather vicious caricatures of Wilde. In the latter 1890s he reinvented himself as a public speaker (Gareth Cordery and Joseph Meisel (eds), *The Humours of Parliament Harry Furniss's View of Late-Victorian Political Culture*, Ohio State University Press, 2015)



However, Furniss's cartoon *The Private View* published in *The World* Christmas 1882 centred on Wilde and may have influenced William Powell Frith's famous *The Private View at the Royal Academy 1881*, which was shown in 1883. My article on Furniss's cartoon also considers Wilde's relationship with Edmund Yates, proprietor/editor of *The World*. ('Private Views: Frith, Furniss and the Importance of Portraying Oscar', *The Wildean, A Journal of Oscar Wilde Studies*, Vol. 52, 2018, pp.3-62).

## Poetic Lampoons

During 1881 the satire shifted away from cartoons to doggerel verses lampooning Wilde's name and style. He became Oscuro Mild in *The World* and Oscuro Wildegoose, Drawit Milde, the Wilde-eyed poet, 'Bother Jonathan' Wilde, and Ossian Wilderness in *Punch*. I have assembled a corpus of these verses published in *Punch*, cross referencing them with Wilde's poems. They may have been penned by Edwin James Milliken. The *Pall Mall Gazette* also published a series of satiric poems 'Idylls of the Dado' (1882), while the *St James Gazette* published 'Aestheticopolis' (Feb 1881) and 'The Ballad of Bedford Park' (Dec 1881). *The World* also contributed to this tradition of parodic poems with 'The New Helen' (1880) and 'Ego Upto Snuffibus Poeta' (1881) which directly targeted Wilde.

## The Press and the Stage

There is a remarkable crossover from the press to stage productions. Tom Taylor, editor of *Punch* until his death in 1880, originally staged *Victims* at the Haymarket in 1857. It was revamped with an aesthetic setting in 1878, with the third act materially altered to introduce du Maurier's caricatures.

Burnand's burlesque *A Tale of Old China* (April 1875) appropriated du Maurier's 'chinamania' cartoon series and the fashion in aesthetic circles for collecting Old Blue, as Oriental blue-and-white china was commonly known.

### Francis Burnand and *The Colonel*

Du Maurier's caricatures were animated once again in Francis Burnand's *The Colonel* (Feb 1881). The success of this foray against the aesthetes tends to be eclipsed by Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (April 1881). However, *The Colonel* was immensely successful even enjoying a Royal Command performance at Abergeldie Castle (Anne Anderson, *The Colonel: Shams, Charlatans and Oscar Wilde*, *The Wildean, A Journal of Oscar Wilde Studies*, Vol. 25, July 2004, pp.34-53).

### 'Our Captious Critic'

Wallis Mackay, who illustrated and wrote the regular theatrical column 'Our Captious Critic' in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* from its inception, also staged a silly burlesque minstrel sketch *Da-Do-Dum* in July 1881. His career as a 'dramatist' was apparently short lived, as Mackay found himself in Chilaone, a tropical island and port just off the coast of

Mozambique, acting as 'special correspondent' for the *Illustrated London News* by 1889. Mackay was destined to suffer a sad fate, committing suicide in 1907. A failing career and alcoholism took its toll. By 1907 his illustrative style would have looked dated. Anne Anderson, 'Da-Do-Dum: Oscar Wilde and 'Lays of Christy Minstrelsy', forthcoming)

I welcome any any comments on my research project!

Other publications which may be of interest:

'Wilde's World', Frederick S. Roden (ed) *Critical Insights Oscar Wilde*, Ipswich, Mass: Salem Press/Grey House Publishing, 2019, pp.3-22.

'Wilde, Whistler and Staging "Art for Art's Sake"', *Theatre Notebook A Journal of the History and Technique of the British Theatre*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 2016, pp.32-66.

'Oscar's Enemy... and neighbour: 'Arry Quilter and the 'Gospel of Intensity', *The Wildean, A Journal of Oscar Wilde Studies*, Vol 27, July 2005, pp. 39-54.